



# They Came by Night

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**W**E were in camp in Sirsi. Sirsi is a large Mohammedan town about twenty miles from Moradabad. We had been there three or four days when my husband was obliged to leave me to "hold the camp," as we say, and to carry on the work as best I could for a few days.

The evening after he left I was sitting alone in the tent with the prospect of a dull time before me. It was just eight—two hours until bed time. I had been to villages during the day and felt too tired and stupid to write. The sun's white glare on the sandy roads had affected my eyes so that I felt disinclined to read. So I sat idly, wishing someone would come, or that it were time to go to bed.

I was just on the point of trying to read, anyway, when our little fox terrier, always on the alert to hear the

faintest sound, rushed out into the darkness and began to bark vociferously. I went to the tent door and saw dimly through the trees a strange procession. About twenty figures shrouded in long white garments were wending their way through the shadowy avenues of mango trees. It brought to my mind visions of the Druids among their sacred oaks. They drew near, and as they came within the light that was streaming from the tent door, I saw at the head of the procession, marching along quite like a little drum major, Martha, the Bible woman.

Then I began to guess who my strange visitors were. They surely must be some of the zenana women; and going toward them I greeted them heartily, and said in my prettiest manner, "Will you walk into my parlor?"

In they filed, and now no more was I reminded of Druids, for with giggling and whispering and jingling of bangles they removed their *burkhas*,\* and while

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\*A *burkha* is a long white outer garment worn by *purdah nishin* women. It covers the body from head to foot concealing even the hands. There are holes covered with gauze for the eyes.

they were doing it my mind went back to certain girlish pranks of long ago, and I could think of nothing so much like this as a Halloween masquerade party when we all went out on a night's frolic wrapped in dominos. There was a little difficulty in disposing of them as the space was limited, but soon they were all nicely seated on the floor. Then I asked Martha how such a wonderful thing as this surprise party from *purdah nishin* women and girls had ever been brought about.

"Well, it was like this," she said. "I told Kaneis Fathma this morning that the sahib had gone to Lucknow for two days and that you were alone. Then she said: 'I have never seen a tent—neither the inside nor the outside. Come for me to-night after it is dark and mother and I will go with you to see the mem sahib and the tent.'"

Kaneis Fathma and her mother were both Mohammedan widows of means and influence. Having no fathers or brothers or husbands or sons, they enjoyed considerable independence and did about as they pleased.

"But the others?" I asked.

“Well, Kaneis Fathma knew that Asgari’s husband, who has a very soft heart, would let her come, so I went there. Then Asgari was sure that Karim Baksh would let his wives and daughters come and I went there. Then I kept going on and on from house to house until I had gone to nearly all the houses. Not half would let their wives come. Some men have such hard hearts!”

I agreed to this and deplored the fact. Nevertheless, as I looked around the crowded tent I was glad that not all had come.

Now that they had come, I did not know what to do with them. Of one thing I was glad; I should not be expected to serve refreshments. It would have been quite embarrassing to try to serve tea to so many with only two cups.

However, they did not require much entertaining, for they were in quite a new world. The tent and its belongings fascinated them. Nothing escaped their notice, and questions galore were asked. The mystery of the camp bed and the chairs that could be taken apart and

rolled up in neat little rolls was explained. The typewriter was exhibited and a specimen of printing was handed around to be greatly admired upside down. The alarm of the little jewel clock was set off and its shrill tinkling threw them into ecstasies of delight.

The possibilities of the tent were soon exhausted. We now engaged in conversation. There is always one theme in which we missionary mothers and our Hindustani sisters may meet on common ground and that is our children. I told about ours, and they told about theirs. Some with tears in their eyes told of little ones who had "disappeared," which is a touching and rather hopeless way they have of speaking of death. Others gave animated descriptions of the weddings of their sons or daughters. Many were the questions asked about the three little ones in school in Naini Tal and much sympathy was expressed because our customs were such that children and parents must be separated.

After awhile even this subject became threadbare. Still the women sat. They looked as if they intended always to do

so. I began to try to think of something else to do. While I was thinking a cock crew right in the tent. It was rather startling to say the least. The generous one who had brought it as an offering to me liberated it and it walked boldly over the laps of the women and around the tent with its eye cocked in quite an impertinent manner, not seeming at all embarrassed by its strange surroundings.

The crowing of the cock reminded me of Peter, and the thought of Peter brought the welcome suggestion that I had in my trunk a Berean leaf cluster. So I fished it out and held it up before their admiring eyes. They were familiar with the stories of the life of Christ, for most of those women have Testaments of their own which they read with great earnestness. Many of the pictures they recognized as illustrating something they had already read or heard. They were delighted with this new way of telling Bible stories.

After this it seemed just the thing to have a little quiet talk together about the things of the Spirit. In the hush that followed Martha's voice arose in

plaintive prayer, and when she began "Our Father who art in Heaven" all joined in.

At the close of the prayer I politely said: "Now you may all go." They arose reluctantly and, slipping on their *burkhas*, each gave me a cheerful *salaam* and said she had had a very happy time. Then, headed by the valiant Martha, they took their Druid-like departure through the dark and shadowy grove.

I went to bed quite rested and happy. That such a visitation from *purdah nishin* women is possible in a bigoted Mohammedan town indicates very clearly that a brighter day has dawned. It also indicates great confidence in the mission and Bible women. Thinking of these things, and feeling thankful and glad, I went to sleep.—*Woman's Missionary Friend*.